

The evolution of longevity inequality in Italy and concerns for the pension system

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Abstract

Despite the remarkable advances in life expectancy experienced over the past century, health inequalities between and within socio-economic groups are still a distinctive trait of more and less advanced economies. Individuals with lower socio-economic position (SEP) are more likely to suffer from physical and mental disease and die on average at a younger age. Whereas the resulting gap in average life expectancy is a well-established evidence in all social sciences, its evolution over time has been seldom investigated in Italy.

This article aims to present the most updated evidence on life expectancy socio-economic differentials in Italy and to assess their evolution across the last 20 years. The empirical analysis is run using the INPS administrative archives, covering the universe of private sector workers. We compute and contrast life expectancy and adjusted incidence rate ratio of mortality for workers belonging to different socio-economic positions, adopting a set of indicators based on both absolute and relative SEP measures. Life expectancy is computed following standard life tables techniques and a negative binomial multivariable regression analysis for count data is employed to estimate adjusted incidence rate ratio of mortality.

The results highlight that the gains in life expectancy have not been distributed equally and when measured across different SEP measures longevity gaps are indeed widening in Italy. A trend toward higher inequality is particularly alarming for men employed in the norther regions of Italy, for whom at 65 years old the divide in life expectancy between the richest and poorest 10% has been steadily and increasingly above 2.5 years since the nineties.

These results are important to inform the public debate about the equity of the pension system, as past Italian reforms have increased retirement age and linked it to the average life expectancy in the population. Moreover, they may help designing future reforms aiming at increasing the equity of the system through the definition of clauses of exemption or greater flexibility for categories of workers dying systematically at younger age.